

Reflections on Officer Promotion Boards Or You and Your Promotion Record: Are You Ready?

by Col Katie Halvorson, HQ USAF/ILV

Last summer, I had an opportunity to be a member of a reserve promotion board at Headquarters Air Reserve Personnel Center in Denver, CO. This was an eye-opening experience I'd like to share with you. It's never too early to make sure your record is an accurate reflection of your career, and you are well-prepared for your next promotion board.

The first thing that struck me was the magnitude of the task levied on a panel of five colonels and a promotion board chairman who is a general officer. Given the diverse background of our panel, I frankly didn't know how we could plow through hundreds of records in one short week. Our panel members had never met before, we had varied Air Force careers in both rated and non-rated backgrounds, and we had time in grade from as little as one year up to several years. Two of us had previous promotion board experience. We also represented different parts of the total force: two from the Air National Guard, two active duty, and one individual mobilization augmentee – IMA.

I was pleasantly surprised when our group quickly centralized our scoring methodology in only two "test" scoring rounds, where we scored several old records and discussed any differences greater than two points in our scores. With few differences in individual record scores, I was confident that the panel members shared common values on core "whole person" principles such as contribution to the mission, quality performance, what defined consistent career progression, and visible potential to perform at the next higher grade.

The panel's quick and confident test scoring exercise rapidly turns to dogged determination as the true promotion board process kicks in. Panel members sit in a small, well-lit room around a round table with paper and pencils, while ARPC staff and helpers bring in promotion folders - stacks upon stacks *upon stacks* of promotion folders! What you've heard before is completely true: each board member takes about two-three minutes to look at your entire promotion folder, and then makes a life-defining decision on your future. Each panel member quickly develops his or her own method of opening a promotion folder and quickly skimming for key indicators in the Officer Selection Brief, such as:

- Performance - does the reservist a consistent record of points for good years, or are gaps in performance explained?
 - Because different categories of reservists have different annual point requirements, it was important to always check what type of reservist was being evaluated against what points they had attained
- Current duty title, duty history (variety of base, MAJCOM or staff-level assignments), mobility and different locations
- Extra points performed, such as volunteering for deployments
- Professional Military Education – PME
- Higher level education
- Standouts on the record – good (awards) and bad (disciplinary action, lack of awards)

After the initial Officer Selection Brief skim and notes on exceptions, the next daunting task is to read the OPRs and PRF in the selection folder. Remember I said each Board member will review hundreds of records in a one week period? Well, in my opinion, actual **reading the PRF and OPRs is the critical event** for most promotion records.... why? Just imagine yourself sitting for hours on end, reading until you feel that your eyeballs will drop out of their sockets and you'll never have any feeling again in posterior body parts. Now imagine what could you possibly read that keeps you energized? Wakes up your spirit and makes you want to read more? Excites your imagination and helps you understand the accomplishments of individual you are reading about? What I am suggesting is OPRs and PRF have to reach off the page and **grab the promotion board reader's attention!** The written words must be enthusiastic, creatively highlight real accomplishments, and reflect a passion that makes the promotion board member not only want to read thoroughly, but will remember after he/she puts the record down. Can I give you magic buzzwords or phrases that I read? No – not really, because it isn't about fancy words or hollow phrases. Each record is unique, but I can tell you the promotion board member *knows it* when they read an enthusiastic record, because they *feel it* in their gut.

In the interest of time, the most emphasis is normally placed on the top (most recent) OPR and the PRF: this sets your impression of the individual, just as if the individual officer walks into the room and shakes your hand for the first time. First impressions are always important, and negative ones are especially difficult to overcome even if there are good impressions buried later in the record. Next, usually the last five OPRs are read to compare the general "track record" of the officer's levels of responsibility, range of staff vs. command experience, variety of jobs and accomplishments, and who (what levels) rating/endorsement officials are. Once again, there are some key indicators in the OPRs and PRF to share with you:

- Avoid "white space" on the forms – it is a stand out that appears as if the rater lacks enough positive information to share with the promotion board
- Use bullet statements. Although required, we saw quite a few OPRs with long narratives that were very difficult to read
- Use descriptive phrases, hard-hitting verbs, and a mix of punctuation (exclamation marks, commas, dashes, and so on)
- Don't make flowery, insubstantial, flowing commentaries – tell the board *how* the officer performed, *specific achievements*, and *what the impact* to the mission was. This is especially important for support officers; while our board members unquestionably recognized the value of rated officers' direct contribution to mission effectiveness; I found myself more than once speaking out on how support duties *can and do* impact the mission
- Explain acronyms – for example PRIME Ribs, or an award name (tell the board is it a local award or an Air Force-level award – what is its significance?)
- The PRF should reflect the whole career – thus giving a "whole person" view – not just the current job
- Both the PRF and OPRs should reflect differentiation in level of assignments, types of jobs, mobility of the individual, ability to lead in different situations, achievements – all of this points to *promotion potential* and *ability to assume responsibility* at the next higher grade
- Awards at all levels should be visible not only in the career brief but also reflected in PRF or OPRs where appropriate. When records were very close in scores, number and level of awards could be tie-breakers
- Make sure recommendations are appropriate for the individual's grade – e.g., don't recommend a junior officer for senior service school

- OPRs need to be different from one year to the next: our Board saw one record with two identical PRFs, signed by the same rater and indorsing officials, with only the dates being changed. Shame on the rating official – but it still tends to leave a negative impression for individual's record as well!

Some closing thoughts. Individual "Letters to the Promotion Board" were all read, often discussed, and *did not* have a negative impact on the board's scoring – contrary to what I had been told in the past. It's important to note each letter had a distinct purpose (such as explaining a break in service and the individual's desires to remain in the reserve), were short and factual, and above all there was "*no whining!*" Ensure that your Officer Selection Brief is up-to-date: we had awards not reflected on the brief, or awards on the brief with no citations, making it difficult to assess impacts when compared to a complete record. Make sure your organization submits your OPR and PRF in time to meet the Board – some had the most recent OPR or PRF missing, representing a huge missing gap and leaving a negative impression. And last: if you are a non-selectee for promotion, don't give up getting your record corrected or completed, and make every effort to get that first-rate OPR and PRF submitted for your next promotion board. My promotion board experience convinced me that whole person records are just like cream in the milk barrel – they will float to the top and result in the best-qualified Air Force officers being selected for promotion!